

A ‘Yellow Peril’ Revival Fueling Western Fears of China’s Rise



Abstract Western concerns about the rise of China are not just the result of cool, hard-headed analysis. As history tells us, they may also come from a subconscious, emotional fear of a non-Caucasian civilization.

Do we arrive at geopolitical judgments from only cool, hard-headed, rational analysis? If emotions influence our judgments, are these conscious emotions, or do they operate at the level of our subterranean subconscious? Any honest answer to these questions would admit that non-rational factors always play a role. This is why it was wrong for Western media to vilify Kiron Skinner, the director of policy planning at the US State Department, for naming racial discomfort as a factor at play in the emerging geopolitical contest between the United States and China.

Skinner was correct in saying that “the Soviet Union and that competition, in a way, it was a fight within the Western family”. Referring to the contest with China, she said: “it’s the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian”. That China is not Caucasian is a factor in the geopolitical contest and it may also explain strong emotional reactions in Western countries to China’s rise.

Take the ongoing trade dispute between the United States and China as an example. Critics of China are rational and correct when they state that China has stolen intellectual property and occasionally bullied US firms into sharing their technology. But a calm, rational description of China’s behavior would also add that such behavior is normal for an emerging economy.

The United States also stole intellectual property, especially from the British, at a similar stage of its economic development. Equally important, when the United States agreed to admit China into the WTO as a ‘developing country’, it agreed that ‘under the WTO’s agreements on intellectual property, developed countries are under “the obligation” to provide incentives to their companies to transfer technology to less developed countries’. This is a point that Yukon Huang, a former World Bank economist, has pointed out.

Most Western portrayals of China’s emergence as a great power lack balance. They tend to highlight negative dimensions of China’s rise but omit the positive

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dimensions. When US Vice President Mike Pence gave a comprehensive speech on China on 4 October 2018, he said: "Over the past 17 years, China's GDP has grown nine-fold; it's become the second largest economy in the world. Much of this success was driven by American investment in China". This is a factually incorrect statement. China's economic success has been primarily driven by the rejuvenation of the Chinese people, not US investment.

Though Washington prides itself as a center of calm and rational strategic thinking, such an unbalanced speech was not attacked in the liberal media. Instead, many cheered the US Vice President for attacking China.

This virulent anti-China atmosphere is reminiscent of the mid-1980s when Western media attacked Japan ferociously. The distrust of yellow-skinned people has resurfaced again. As former US ambassador Chas Freeman has observed: 'In their views of China, many Americans now appear subconsciously to have combined images of the insidious Dr. Fu Manchu, Japan's unnerving 1980s challenge to US industrial and financial primacy, and a sense of existential threat analogous to the Sinophobia that inspired the Anti-Coolie and Chinese Exclusion Acts'.

The people of the United States need to question how much of their reactions to China's rise result from hard-headed rational analysis and how much are a result of deep discomforts with a non-Caucasian civilization. We may never know the real answer as these titanic struggles between reason and emotion are probably playing out in deep subconscious terrains. Still, we should thank Kiron Skinner for alluding to the fact that such subconscious dimensions are at play here. The time has come for an honest discussion of the 'yellow peril' dimension in US-China relations. As Freud taught us, the best way to deal with our subconscious fears is to surface them and deal with them.

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